

## **BROKEN BONES** a work by tontodechoque

### **Chapter 1: Encounter**

Year 1, January 1st:

First day as a knight. The welcome process has been a success. I've almost memorized the tower's structure. My superiors claim they see great potential, but I know they say that to everybody. Partners seem friendly, for now. Want to learn.

Year 1, January 2nd:

All in order.

Year 1, January 3rd:

Idem.

Year 1, January 4th:

Idem.

Year 2, July 26th:

(Blank entry.)

Year 3, October 18th:

Idem.

Year 5, June 29th:

Idem.

Year 7, February 5th:

An intruder has entered the tower from the valley. No contraband, wielding a sword. He seemed disoriented and scared, so I instructed him on how to leave the forest without meeting his demise. He took some supplies and headed into the woods.

Year 7, February 6th:

All in order.

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Monotony.

If there was a word that described that agonizing feeling which characterized every living second of their adult life, it would be that. Monotony.

Ever since they got promoted as headmaster, responsibility and stress grasped each other's hands and took part in the magical dance of despair. The only thing keeping them from dying of boredom was the Rouge incident, but that was five years ago. The memory of that controversy was perfect to distract them from monotony. That damned monotony.

The same steps, the same words day by day, the same faces, the same streets, the same food, the same uniform, the same formalities. It almost felt like they had been cursed to live through the same day over and over again. It was madness.

It's not like they hated their job, or their students; they just needed a break. They needed to escape. Even if only for a day, they had to get away from the void they called routine if they valued their sanity. They needed a change, something that reminded them they were still alive. Something that proved to them that their heart was still beating.

They needed a challenge.

It just so happened that it was possible for them to compensate for overtime work with vacation days, if the amount exceeded 24 hours; and it just so happened, too, that they had been saving up enough days to redeem a whole month off. It also just so happened that they had communicated they were going on vacation starting mid-april; and it just so happened that their birthday was in that month as well. What a coincidence!

That day, however, they had to endure. May still hadn't come then, yet they could almost taste the freedom that desired month would bestow upon them. Two weeks remained until then, and they decided it was the perfect time to tell their inferiors

and torso, but just before they could do that, a vision was shown within it: the path the ghost was planning to take to attack them again. The knight was taken by surprise when they managed to foresee their location and point the torch right at him; some unstable debris falling onto him from the scare.

"How did you...?!"

"I had a little bit of help." they shook the ball lightly so as to not break it.

"Outrageous!! How dare you mock us like this?! Can you even begin to understand what you're saying, the weight of your words?! You shall meet your demise!"

He repeated the ambush several times, and all of them were interrupted by Vermillion's semi-clairvoyance. It came to a point where it wielded so many ruins that, when it lost control of them because of the fire, they fell on top of it, burying it and declaring its opponent as the winner.

Once they were done celebrating the victory, they discarded the dagger in favor of the crystal ball. They dropped in front of the ghost, who had seemingly fainted.

"Here, you can keep it."

And with that, they turned around and headed for the cathedral's exit. Vermillion did not expect him to reply, yet a weak voice echoed through the place.

"Is it true?"

"Huh?"

"Can you really see inside the crystal ball?" the sudden tenderness in his words caught Vermillion off-guard.

"Sure, I mean... that's what it's for, right?"

After those words, the both of them looked at each other. The intensity of the event kept them both stuck in place for what seemed like hours.

"How interesting." is all he said after the pause.

The apparition left with the same speed he used to destroy the heart of the cathedral, going through the ruins as if nothing had happened.

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Year 7, May 12th:

~~A bearded vulture has entered. I will not allow it to make the tower their nest.~~

Change of plans.

"You fool!" Vermillion's apparent calm collapsed the moment they heard the specter yell. "Do you have some sort of brain damage that prohibits you from obeying orders or are you just plain stupid?!"

"I mean, to be fair--"

"Save your breath! Your choice is made. As the supreme representative of the Knight Unit, it is my command to make you pay the toll. And pay you shall, with your life!"

The apparition rushed towards Vermillion and grappled with them. They tried to attack him with their dagger to no avail, as it passed right through his body.

Floor tiles came off of the crossing and flew straight towards them, Vermillion almost didn't make it. In just a second, the edifice's structure had become hostile and created bars with its walls and crossbeams in order to trap them. Thanks to their trained reaction time, Vermillion was able to escape the ambushes the stone mender prepared for them.

Vermillion lost sight of the entity and prepared himself for whichever attack it had planned. Considering how useless the dagger had been, they had to act fast if they didn't want to give up their life. The pillars didn't take long to contort towards them, and just behind those same pillars came the armored ghost. However, just before the impact, Vermillion had a sudden realization. Up until then, it had been attacking them face on. It shouldn't have any problem changing the angle of his attack to win, being a metaphysical entity and all, so why didn't he? The answer was simple.

"Stand back!" the way they shook their torch into his direction was enough for the knight to let out a piercing shriek. The walls of the cathedral, along with their master, backed off with no further delay.

An insurmountable fear of fire. That was it, that explained everything. Why all the torches were either unlit or missing, the ashes in the torture room, why the entity took so long to make its triumphal entrance, it was all connected. The dagger didn't matter anymore; they finally had a proper weapon to defend themselves.

"Yeah, that's right! Let the light of God be your salvation!!!"

Wrath blinded the ghost as they used the infrastructure to create a web of debris that divided the cathedral between the crossing and the altar, forbidding them from reaching the crystal ball. Still, prior to its completion, Vermillion went deep into the barricade to get to the other side before the pillars, walls and religious paraphernalia engulfed them.

They were faster than the innards of the cathedral and managed to reach the altar, where their prize rested. They didn't take long to pick up the surprisingly light crystal ball. In fact, they were actually planning on keeping it between their arm

and students their tasks while they were out. They were going to miss them, in a way.

All the paperwork that permitted them to redeem their esteemed days off was sickening, so to rest their head they opted to plan their activities all throughout the month. They didn't plan on staying home every day, obviously. Staying away from the battlefield for so long had them starved for action.

They decided to find the nearest Soluilde map at the academy's library and check which places they hadn't visited yet. The quest, however, was in vain, as they had already been in the most emblematic and eye-catching places. Their excursions, therefore, shall seek the deepest of Galterea's whereabouts if they wanted the satisfaction of a brand-new odyssey.

While they searched for maps of other regions, they remembered a specific anecdote they heard multiple times through the halls of the academy. It was believed that, in some place on the western border of the Astra forest lay a hunted, wretched tower that acted as the pathway between the world of the living and of the dead. That last part must've been hyperbole, they thought. Still, there was no harm in searching for it, and if at the end of the day the legendary tower didn't exist, they would've entertained themselves in the forest anyway. They had already made up their mind: that tower would be their first destination.

To Vermillion, their plan guaranteed a good time.

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Year 7, May 10th:

Idem.

Year 7, May 11th:

Idem.

Year 7, May 12th:

A bearded vulture has entered. I will not allow it to make the tower their nest.

After many tiresome days, they finally managed to cross to the other side of the forest. It was partly their fault; they did in fact want to challenge themselves by leaving their ax at home; yet the only thing that they accomplished is slowing their pace down. Many would feel honored to always have a weapon and bring it anywhere for whatever may happen; Vermillion was not that kind of person.

Still, the worst was over, they thought; if they were lucky, that tower may have some inhabitants, and in turn food. They could only hope that those people were generous enough to feed someone who'd been starving for days.

Their next objective, therefore, was to find the damn thing. According to what they heard, the tower should be right after Astra forest, yet they weren't able to see it. They quickly put aside their leg cramps to proceed with their journey throughout the border; that would be a problem for another time.

This leisurely walk was enough to make them accept the fact that they were finally away from the academy they've devoted themselves to for the past years. Comforting fresh air made its way into their lungs: addicting; poisoning, almost. The sensation felt illegal, as if they weren't abiding academy protocol and were to be reprimanded for it; those rules made their way into their daily life day by day without them knowing.

Sometimes they were perplexed by how much they changed ever since they got hired. The amount of self-control they had obtained was exorbitant to their insatiable nature. Their personality has noticeably changed, they almost felt proud of how much they accomplished with words and not with fists. Yet, deep inside, they knew it was all a fluke. A disguise used to survive in a world where their way of living was deemed inadequate. Over there, however, they could be whoever they wanted to be unapologetically; nature wasn't one to judge. Just in that instant, they were the most normal person in the world.

Oh, how they missed this feeling.

Their stroll came to a stop when a tall, far away shadow caught their eye, then redirected their path towards it. After a few steps, they found it.

Firewall Tower. The place separating the flames of the dead from the calm of the alive. The building they so wished to investigate, the building their instinct ached for. An incredibly vertical, splendid architectonic marvel; it was said that its length continued underground, reaching the underworld and going beyond the darkness.

Without question, they reached the entrance in a hurry and headed inside.

One of the first things they noticed was how dark it was compared to the outside; Vermillion squinted hard so their eyes could get used to the change in brightness. Once that was dealt with, it was clear that many unlit torches were hung in the walls. They took one for themselves, in case they were to find some fire.

heart. The paper amalgamation came to a stop once they had reached what it seemed like a wall; upon closer inspection, though, a pair of doorknobs unmasked the true nature of that which lay hidden behind the pages. Without further delay, they entered the next room.

A high ceiling decorated with arches and domes greeted them, a pleasant juxtaposition to the narrow chambers they had found up until then. The image gave them a kind of peace they didn't quite know how to explain; they couldn't begin to comprehend, rather, how a place of such magnitude could even fit in that tower.

They had just entered a damn cathedral.

Observing the edifice from the narthex gave them an idea of its altitude, they then walked straight to the crossing so they had a better view. Stained glass windows and figures adorned the chapels further away, giving the place the faintest of colors. Their steps echoed loudly, they were their only companions, after all. A baptismal font could be seen beside the altar, but they ignored it, more fixated on the object exposed on the latter. A strange item, not traditional to cathedrals in any way: a crystal ball. Jackpot.

Before they were able to grab it, a musical chord made them jump in place. Vermillion didn't take long to figure out where the melody came from, as it danced around the holy place. A huge and imposing organ lay in the triforium above the entrance, the biggest stained-glass window in the cathedral behind it. From where they stood, they had no way of discerning the virtuoso that engulfed the room in an ethereal aura, if they even existed. Then again, there could've always been a possibility of a complex automation system playing the keys without human intervention, making them truly alone in the chamber.

Their fear got the better of them; they flexed their knee as to slide their hand into their boot and equip the dagger. In half a second, they used to take it out, they had already formed a plan: take the ball with their arm and leave before whoever was on the upper floor could lay a finger on them. When they turned around to face the altar, the music stopped.

"You!"

The accusatory finger of the floating armor was enough for them to enter a defensive state. It appeared to have been a knight; his face and body covered in a white tunic. Horned skulls adorned his right pauldron and hood, Vermillion thought of this as trophies of his past victims, and that they would be next. The entity drew near them before they could react.

"What is it that you seek? For what purpose did you come to these lands?!"

"Well, it was either this or the Pikudos, so..."

the same time punished them for it. It was almost as if it had a mind of its own and it wanted them to get away from it. What they didn't expect, though, was a single paper sheet hung where the torch once was. They stepped closer to the note and started reading the cursive lettering:

'Dearest visitor,

it is our wish and hope that thou possess the gift of literacy, lest this message's mission be for naught.

It is not our intention to cause thee any feeling of unease, yet we fear thou art, in this very moment, invading private property. But of course, we understand Firewall Tower's immense richness as part of the cultural Galtérea scene — it is only natural for the most interested in the matter to wish to explore its innards. That being said, this circumstance does not give thee the right to enter without previous notification, and much less to commit an act of thievery.

We kindly invite thee to discuss thy next excursion to the site, as well as the restitution of the subtracted weapon, over a wonderful cup of tea, in any of the marvelous establishments of the valley. However, should thou show the slightest indication of acting against the will of those who once made the Tower their home, it would be wise for thee to leave the premises posthaste.

Our most cordial regards,

-Sir Verdi Spinto, Representative of Firewall Tower's Knight Unit.'

Fuck that.

Vermillion hadn't gone through the horrors of the forest just to come back empty-handed. The audacity of the note made their blood boil, to the point of almost ripping it apart and incinerating it.

Therefore, they decided to ignore it and proceeded to the interior of the tower once more. As they came to expect, the entrance to the next room changed once again, this time it became a single archway that redirected towards a long, dark hallway. The sound of boot crushing paper alerted them once more. Another note; this one, way shorter:

'We recommend thou obey. Turn back before thou regret it.'

The tower protector's threats fell on deaf ears; Vermillion was already determined to keep going forward. They discarded the paper and entered deeper into the heart of the beast. Papers filled the walls as they moved forward, several messages along the lines of 'get away', 'thou shall not be here' and 'get out' started piling up, each in worse calligraphy than the last. The severity of the notes was high, to the point where they covered up the entire hallway like an unrecognizable cocoon, from head to toe. Upon seeing this, a little pyromaniac was born in the bottom of their

"Hello?"

Reverb made their voice get more distorted than their helmet already did. Time passed, yet the only reply to their greetings was their own voice bouncing off the walls.

Their left hand rested on the wall to follow the structure of the room, hopefully without tripping over anything; the other hand held the torch high as an improvised mace. The more steps they took, the less they could see; they had no choice but to stay alert.

They came to a halt when their feet stumbled upon the the first step of a staircase. A spiral staircase, at that, which inherently made them disadvantageous if any hostiles were to draw near. Despite the danger, they decided to go forth, careful not to trip and fall.

A faint glow that originated from the upper floor made its way into the staircase; an equally faint hope of finding a light source to light up the torch with sprouted from within their heart. Yet, the more steps they took, the more they realized that light was not, in fact, that of which they had expected. Instead of resembling the warmth of a campfire or a lit lantern, it was similar to the cold reflection of seawater in a the top of a cave.

Once their fingers felt the wall cease to exist, they pushed aside that contradiction and stepped forward to the second floor. Moonlight crept from the windows at the left of the now lit main hallway. The passage of time could explain the coldness of the glow; after all, it was late noon when they left the woods. The satellite decided to show mercy in their tired eyes and bless their sight with the slightest amount of light.

Despite the low amount of light, it was enough to distinguish unexplored doors in the right wall. There were also no torches to be seen in their corresponding hooks.

They quickly brushed it off and made their way to the first door. Locked. The second and third door were no dice either, but the latch on the fourth one came undone by their touch alone. Just for a moment, they swore to have caught a figure in the corner of their eye, yet when they turned around to see, the door at the end of the hallway stared back at them.

However, there was no time to waste, and they made their way inside. The door's screech welcomed them into what seemed like a guest room, awaiting in excellent condition its next guest. Tranquility irradiated from the chamber; it was certainly a great place to rest. Despite this, Vermillion was more fixated on the fire of the chimney, and hurried over to light up the torch. Finally having a stable light source at any time wherever they went made them instantly relieved, yet they couldn't ignore a single detail. When they found the tower for the first time, there was no smoke coming from the top; in fact, there was no chimney to be seen outside. The

latter could be easily solved: it could've simply had an air vent that connected this room, and the rest of the rooms if they also had chimneys, with a trapdoor or similar structure at the top of the tower to let the smoke exit. The former, however, only had one solution: there was someone else at the tower.

Once they realized this, they instantly checked every nook and cranny of the room to find anything that would help them survive. Having inspected everything, and not finding a single thing, they turned around to face the door and peeked outside. Both sides of the hall were empty, so they headed out and into the large door at the end of the hallway. Going through it revealed a much larger, surprisingly higher quality hallway. Curtains and knight's armors complemented each pillar of the passage. Walls were filled with paintings and stained-glass windows depicting war scenes or authoritarian idols throughout the years.

Among all of the paintings, one struck out to them the most: it depicted a series of knights unsheathing their swords in unison. None of them wore their helmets, revealing that all of them were part of a subspecies that developed horns. In actuality, what had really caught their attention was a specific knight, who, in contrast with his colleagues, didn't have any. No, that wasn't it; he *did* have them, it was just that they were filed down. Something about seeing someone like that being granted the status of knighthood filled Vermillion's heart with a sense of familiarity. It made them feel... accomplished? proud? They couldn't quite pinpoint the exact feeling, but it was refreshing to see someone like that in such a place, and that it was documented in such notorious media as art. They glanced at the plaque of the frame shortly after.

'To the knights who gave up their lives to protect Firewall Tower.'

They let the melancholy pass right through them as they walked down the hallway, inspecting the rest of the decoration careful enough not to burn it with the torch. At the end, there was an identical door to the one they just came from, so they decided to go through as well. The next room was something they did not expect.

The first floor lobby. Or, at least, a room that was meant to mimic it. Confusion filled their thoughts as they went towards the entrance to check if it was actually a balcony of some kind. But alas, it wasn't; this was certainly the first floor.

Vermillion didn't understand. It was impossible to get down from the second floor without going through some stairs. Plus, the entrance to the second floor was a spiral staircase, not a door that connected both floors inexplicably. Nothing about that place made any sense, and, at the same time, that made them more eager to find out what was really happening. Along with their contradictory feelings, they turned around to the interior of the tower and, to their surprise, the door to the other side of the lobby changed again. In its place was a staircase that led to the basement. How nice.

They could almost feel the tower itself laughing at them, but it didn't matter. That little sadomasochism session would be over soon; they were sure of it. They followed the new pathway until they found what looked like an armory. Just like the last hallway, it was filled to the brim with armors, but these were less ornamental and seemed sturdier, heavier and more dangerous. There were also a series of tables with utensils to sharpen and create weaponry, but the furnaces used to mend metal weren't in use. The walls were decorated with different types of weapons: swords, axes, daggers, spears, bows and arrows, spikey balls... the list was endless. The armory called to them, as the moonlight gave it an ethereal glow to its metal. They could borrow one, surely no one would notice, they thought.

Before they could grab a weapon to defend themselves, the sound of a door getting slammed shut caught Vermillion off-guard.

"Who goes there?!" they warned, facing the origin of the noise.

There was no one there, just the entrance of another room right beside the corner of the armory. That tower was driving them insane. They took one of the daggers with them just to be sure, but since their skirt didn't have any pockets, they opted to store it in their boot so they could still have a free hand. Prepared for the worst, they gently opened the door.

They expected to have cornered whoever closed the door, but it seemed as though they had escaped, because there was no one else in the small chamber. In fact, they were the second most notorious thing in the room, the first being the lonely chair that lay in the middle of it. Contrary to regular chairs, this one had some sort of belts around its armrests and two front legs. The dried up bloodstains and the huge collection of weapons laying beside the chair made apparent the purpose of such claustrophobic room. Vermillion's heart skipped a beat the moment they spotted the ashes and remains in the corner of the chamber.

A shiver went down their spine trying to imagine the number of people who fell victims to the room's cruelty. Truly, those types of inhumane traditions should've already been buried by the past.

It was when they noticed the same blue shimmer through the door when Vermillion snapped out of their trance. They tried to follow it and ended up in the armory once again, no trace of the light. That, however, did not mean the room didn't change: where once stood a full set of armor, there now was a hole in the ground, with a rope tied to the wall above it. Their head was about to explode, not a single thing that had happened in that damned tower made any sense. Moved by inertia, they threw common sense out the window before they could ponder why that hole had appeared, and instead went through it with the help of the rope, trying not to burn it.

They weren't surprised when they wound up in the first floor lobby again. Clearly, the tower had some kind of secret mechanism that invited them to explore, and at